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ABSTRACT

Grounding their efforts on results of previous research, investigators have sought to improve peer relationships of unpopular children through direct instruction in social skills. Generally, such interventions have been effective in promoting specific outcomes. For example, skill-training programs improve children's ability to form colleague relations but do not lead to more intimate friendship relationships. To assess the reasons social skill training is effective, further research should investigate (1) children's knowledge of social interaction principles or strategies, (2) children's confidence in their ability to produce satisfying social relationships with other children, (3) children's ability to monitor their social interactions with others, and (4) the influence of intervention on the way children construe goals in social situations. Since the construction of social goals may directly affect children's peer relationships, the last of these four areas seems particularly important. Research also indicates that differences exist in the ways popular and unpopular children construe social goals; that aggressive, as opposed to nonagressive, boys read social situations in ways that preclude prosocial goals; that children's goals differ with respect to their status and age; and that individual differences in goals in game-playing contexts exist. (Appended materials include a "loneliness scale" and a list of strategies popular and unpopular children suggested for use in a conflict situation.) (RH)

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Intervention and Children's Peer Relations:

Evaluating Processes and Outcomes

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Paper presented in a symposium on "The Natural Environs of Children at Risk" (Elaine A. Blechman, Chair) at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Anaheim, California, 1983.

In 1973, Emory Cowen and his colleagues published a study that caught the attention of people concerned with the prevention of emotional disorders (Cowen, Pederson, Babigian, Izzo, & Trost, 1973). The Rochester group found that how children were perceived socially by their peers in the third grade was a better predictor of mental health problems over the next eleven to thirteen years than were measures of absenteeism, grade point average, IQ, achievement test performance, teacher ratings, and nurses' ratings of physical well-being. The finding that children's status within the peer group predicted later-life adjustment better than did other, more "sophisticated," measures has a startling quality. Still, the data reported by Cowen and his colleagues fits with evidence from earlier longitudinal studies of the relationship of early peer relations to later life adjustment. Unpopular children are more likely to drop out of school (e.g., Ullmann, 1957), become juvenile delinquent (Roff, Sells, & Golden, 1972), and get discharged from the military for conduct problems (Roff, 1961). The emerging picture is that children's function in the peer system (Hartup, 1983) is a useful predictor of later life adjustment.

There is also evidence that children's functioning in the peer system is predictive of concurrent feelings of well-being. We recently developed a questionnaire to study the feelings of unpopular versus popular children (Asher, Hymel, & Renshaw, in press). This questionnaire contains sixteen primary items focused on loneliness and social dissatisfaction, and eight other "filler" items that are focused on interests and hobbies (see Figure 1). A factor analysis of the items reveals one primary factor consisting of the loneliness and social dissatisfaction items. This loneliness scale has

excellent internal reliability (Asher, Hymel, & Renshaw, in press) and yields scores that are rather stable over time (Hymel, Freigana, Both, Bream, & Bonys, in preparation). Results also indicate that about 10% of a sample of approximately 500 children report strong feelings of loneliness on any particular item, and that children's reports of loneliness are correlated with sociometric status in the classroom (Asher et al., in press). As one would expect, unpopular children are more lonely and more socially dissatisfied.

In a follow-up study, we sub-classified unpopular children using negative and positive nominations, and found that neglected children are only somewhat more lonely than average and popular children, but that rejected children were much more lonely than their peers (Asher & Wheeler, 1983). These findings fit with research by Coie, Dodge and their colleagues suggesting that rejected children are a more "at risk" group (Coie & Dodge, 1983; Coie & Kupersmidt, in press; Dodge, Coie, & Brakke, 1982).

Given evidence that poor peer relations is predictive of serious concurrent and later adjustment problems, and given repeated documentation of the social skill deficits of children who lack friends (see Asher & Hymel, 1981, and Asher & Renshaw, 1981, for reviews), investigators have sought to improve the peer relations of unpopular children through direct instruction in social skills. There now exists at least nine well-controlled experimental studies in which children in regular classrooms are taught social skills and the effects of intervention observed on sociometric status and social behavior. The majority of these studies find that unpopular children's low status in the peer group is improved by direct

instruction in social skills (Gottman, Gonso, & Schuler, 1976; Gresham & Nagle, 1980; Ladd, 1981; Oden & Asher, 1977; Siperstein & Gale, 1983). In the Oden and Asher (1977) study, children made gains in acceptance that were maintained at one-year follow-up. Ladd (1981), Gresham and Nagle (1980), and Gottman, Gonso, and Schuler (1976) have all found significant gains that were maintained when one-month follow-up data were collected. These are extremely important results because without intervention low sociometric status, particularly rejected status, is a rather stable phenomenon (Coie & Dodge, 1983). These results are also impressive in light of the lack of long-term effectiveness of other sorts of interventions with unpopular children (e.g., Chennault, 1967; Lilly, 1971; Rucker & Vincenzo, 1970).

Social skill training studies with unpopular children have one major feature in common; in each study children are taught social skills that previous descriptive research has found to correlate with sociometric status. Still, the particular skills taught have varied across studies. For example, Oden and Asher (1977) taught four general concepts or principles concerning social interaction: participation, cooperation, communication, and validation-support. The purpose was to have children learn these general concepts and then use them as guidelines for generating behavior in specific situations. Ladd (1981), by contrast, taught three rather specific behaviors: asking questions, making suggestions, and offering supportive statements. Interestingly, these and other skill training procedures have been quite successful despite varying program content.

Another interesting feature of this research is the specificity of sociometric outcomes that have been obtained. In each successful intervention, the observed gains in sociometric status were obtained on rating-scale

measures in which children rated (typically on a 1-5 scale) how much they liked to play with the other members of the class. Thus the unpopular children who participated in the training gained in the average rating received from classmates. In contrast, children did not gain on a nomination measure soliciting children's best friendship choices (e.g., Gresham & Nagle, 1980; Oden & Asher, 1977). It seems, then, that there is a useful distinction to be made between gaining in overall acceptance by others (average degree of liking by peers) versus forming best friendships (number of best friendship nominations received) and it appears that skill-training studies are more successful when judged by the former rather than the latter criterion.

This conclusion is strengthened by the results of a recent study by Siperstein and Gale (1983). Previous studies limited children to nominating their best three friends in class. Thus, it could be that children receiving training simply couldn't gain on this measure because their classmates were constrained by the limited-nomination method. Siperstein and Gale modified the procedure to allow children to nominate an unlimited number of "best friends" and then an unlimited number of "other friends." Results indicated that children who received social skill training gained on rating-scale measures but did not gain on the best friends measure. They did, however, gain on the "other friends" measure. These results, along with prior evidence, suggest that available social skills programs are promoting children's ability to form effective colleague relations but are not leading to the formation of more intimate friendship relations. This is not intended as a criticism of the studies to date. For formerly rejected children, satisfactory colleague relations are no small accomplishment!

It should also be emphasized that not all coaching studies produce unequivocally strong results (e.g., Bierman, 1981; Hymel & Asher, 1977; La Greca & Santagrossi, 1980). For example, La Greca and Santagrossi (1980) found that trained children made greater gains in social knowledge and skilled performance and had higher levels of interaction with peers in school, but no significant effects were found on a sociometric measure of peer acceptance. Furthermore, even within the successful studies there are individual children who are unaffected. Still, overall, approximately 50-60% of unpopular children benefit from coaching in social skills. In light of the negative ramifications of poor peer relations, the relatively high success rate of coaching indicates that the intervention should be taken seriously and that efforts be made to understand better why it works.

Why is coaching effective with socially rejected children? As yet we don't have a satisfactory answer to this question because prior research has not been designed to address the question. Studies in this area typically include behavioral and sociometric outcome measures but do not include measures of processes that might help in the interpretation of successful intervention efforts. Several processes are excellent candidates for future study. One element, perhaps the most obvious, is children's knowledge of social interaction principles or strategies. This element was the major focus of interest in the Oden and Asher (1977) study in that children were taught principles including participation, cooperation, communication, and validation-support. Furthermore, children were given (or were asked to provide) specific behavioral examples of each of the concepts and to consider how each concept might make it "more fun" to play the game they were about to play with another child.

Another potentially relevant process variable is children's confidence in their own ability to produce satisfying social relationships with other children. Goetz and Dweck (1980) have shown that unpopular children have less confidence in their social abilities. Indeed, it is possible to construe the coaching intervention as a confidence-building manipulation. Children get to play a variety of games with many different partners. Game-playing sessions are brief and the games do not exceed the child's capabilities. Furthermore, the child is given ideas to use and the sessions generally go very well. It is plausible that a child who has had a history of failure and negative responses from peers could come away from the coaching intervention with renewed confidence and hope.

Another important element of social competence concerns the child's ability to monitor his or her social interactions with others. It seems plausible that the coaching intervention has considerable impact in this area. The coaching procedure encourages children to reflect on and monitor their use of various social interaction principles and to evaluate whether using these ideas contributes to their own and other children's enjoyment of the game-playing sessions. These kinds of monitoring and self-regulating processes have been discussed in the research literature on meta-cognition (Brown, 1978; Flavell, 1976; 1981; Meichenbaum & Butler, 1980). One child we coached made a comment suggesting the relevance of this process when she spontaneously commented, "You mean what I do makes a difference in terms of whether children like me or not?"

Finally, there is the possibility that the intervention is effective because it influences the way children construe goals in social situations (Asher & Renshaw, 1981). Social situations have an inherent ambiguity

(Greene, 1976) and a core problem for children, as for adults, is to figure out what's going on in a particular social situation and what goals and lines of action to pursue.

Multiple goals are possible within the same situation. To illustrate, consider the game-playing situation involving two children that we use in our coaching procedure. Children's goals in a game context might be to develop a relationship, to win, to have a good time, to avoid looking stupid, to improve skills, or some combination of goals. Indeed, a fundamental task for children is to manage or reconcile potentially competing goals such as the goal of winning and the goal of maintaining a relationship with a game opponent.

It seems plausible that the Oden and Asher (1977) coaching procedure influenced children's goals in game situations. As part of the coaching, children frequently were told that using certain concepts might make games more fun to play. Furthermore, after each game session the child was asked whether the game was fun, whether he or she and the game partner had a good time, and whether the ideas previously discussed had helped make the games more fun to play. Thus, there was a major emphasis on game playing as a vehicle for having fun and for making sure that the game partner had fun as well. No mention was made of winning, of demonstrating or improving skills, or other potential goals. Instead, the emphasis was on both partners having fun, and learning whether the ideas helped make games more enjoyable.

The importance of goal construal processes has generally been neglected in research on children's social competence. Most investigators define social competence as the child's ability to pursue interpersonal goals (e.g., O'Malley, 1977). Here, the existence of certain goals is taken for granted

and the focus for study becomes how children pursue these goals. Our view is that this approach to defining and studying social competence is missing a critical piece of the action. Behind the strategies children pursue, lie particular goals, and for many children with peer relationship problems their difficulties may not necessarily be due to lack of knowledge of of interaction strategies, but rather the result of the way goals in social situations have been construed.

Take, for example, one of the hypothetical situations used in our interview research with kindergarten children (Asher & Renshaw, 1981). In this situation, children are shown pictures of two children watching television at the home of one of the children. One of the children, the guest, changes the channel to another program without asking. Our kindergartners were asked what the host child could do. Figure 2 lists the various types of strategies children suggested in response to this situation. We found that unpopular children were more likely to propose aggressive solutions to this and other conflict situations, whereas more popular children proposed either assertive but nonaggressive solutions, or proposed positive accommodating solutions. Do the unpopular children lack knowledge of the more prosocial lines of action, or do they construe the goal in the situation differently? Perhaps for some unpopular children the goal is to defend one's own territory or integrity, or simply to watch a particular show. By contrast, for some popular children, the goal seems to be to defend one's own rights, but not at the expense of the relationship. For other popular children it seems to be to accommodate to the other child, perhaps in the service of the relationship.

The importance of goal construal processes can also be inferred from recent research by Dodge and his colleagues (Dodge, 1980; Dodge & Frame, 1982;

Dodge & Newman, 1981). Dodge is interested in how aggressive versus nonaggressive boys judge the intentions of an actor who engages in a harmful action, but where intentionality is ambiguous. Dodge finds that aggressive boys are more likely to assume intentionality and pursue a retaliatory course of action. In other words, the way aggressive boys read social situations seems to activate less prosocial goals. Interestingly, this bit of attributional bias seems to operate only when the aggressive children are the recipients of harm doing. When aggressive boys are third-party observers, rather than recipients, they are no more likely than nonaggressive boys to infer aggressive intent or recommend retaliation. Dodge's work suggests the way in which certain information-processing biases may be tied to self-protective goals.

In a recent study by Renshaw and I (Renshaw & Asher, 1983), we directly assessed children's goals in hypothetical social situations. Children were shown various situations and asked what they would do and why. Content analysis of children's responses revealed significant, although modest, status differences and relatively strong age differences in children's goals. In a subsequent study using a questionnaire methodology, Taylor and I (Taylor & Asher, in preparation) are finding striking individual differences in goals in game-playing contexts. Furthermore, these differences relate significantly to age and sociometric status. Although much more research is needed, the study of children's goals offers promise in conceptualizing and modifying children's social competence.

To summarize, I have been arguing that what is needed at this stage is research which focuses on processes as well as sociometric and behavioral outcomes of social skill training. The inclusion of process-oriented measures would make it possible to relate changes in processes to changes in outcome. The critical issue both from theoretical and practical perspectives is not just whether coached children gain in status but why. Process-oriented inquiry should promote further progress in this developing area.

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Figure 1

Questionnaire Items

1. It's easy for me to make new friends at school.
*2. I like to read.
3. I have nobody to talk to in my class.
4. I'm good at working with other children in my class.
*5. I watch TV a lot.
6. It's hard for me to make friends at school.
*7. I like school.
8. I have lots of friends in my class.
9. I feel alone at school.
10. I can find a friend in my class when I need one.
*11. I play sports a lot.
12. It's hard to get kids in school to like me.
*13. I like science.
14. I don't have anyone to play with at school.
*15. I like music.
16. I get along with my classmates.
17. I feel left out of things at school.
18. There's no other kids I can go to when I need help in school.
*19. I like to paint and draw.
20. I don't get along with other children in school.
21. I'm lonely at school.
22. I am well-liked by the kids in my class.
*23. I like playing board games a lot.
24. I don't have any friends in class.

* Hobby or interest item.

Figure 2

Types of Strategies in Response to
Conflict Over Which Television Program to Watch

1. Get an authority
   Here the strategy is to get an adult who will take care of the situation.

2. Aggression toward child
   Here the child responds by engaging in some form of physical harm doing toward the child.

3. Verbal abuse toward child
   Here the child responds by engaging in verbal harm doing toward the child.

4. Aggression toward television
   Here the child responds by harming the television in some way.

5. Send her home
   Here the child responds by having the child leave.

6. Invokes "asking" norm
   Here the child tells the child that he or she should have asked before turning the station.

7. Ask child to switch it back
   Here the child's strategy is to request that the child switch it back to the program they were watching.

8. Verbal assertion
   Here the child tells the other child to leave their television set alone, or to turn it back.

9. Find a second TV
   Here the strategy is to get another television so they both can watch what they want.

10. Take turns
    Here the child suggests as a strategy that they take turns watching the shows they want to watch.

11. Turn it back
    Here the child responds by turning it back to the station it was on.

12. Turn it off
Here the child responds by turning the television off.

13. Doing something else alone
Here the child responds by going off by himself and doing something else.

14. Doing something else together
Here the child suggests that they could do something else together.

15. Aquiesce
Here the child's strategy is to let the other child watch what he or she wants and then watch what he or she wants.

16. Invoke sharing norm
Here the child responds by telling child that he or she isn't sharing.

17. Threaten termination of friendship
Here the child responds by threatening that he or she won't be friends with the child who changed the channel.

18. Invoke the "guest" norm
Here the child's strategy is to allow the other child to watch what he or she want because that child is a guest.

19. Invoke "this is my house" norm
Here the strategy is to tell the other child that they are visitors in the host's house and therefore cannot change channels.

20. Informs child of personal preference
Here the strategy is to tell the other child that he/she likes the program that is on.

21. Verbal assertion plus informing child of personal preference
Here the child tells the other child to leave their television set alone to turn it back, and tells the other child that he/she likes the program that is on.

22. Other
These are responses which don't fit into any other strategy.